

Insights into Learner Output

By Ali Shehadeh

One of the basic objectives of research in the field of second language (L2) learning and teaching is to provide useful techniques for teaching in the language classroom. The aim of this article is to address three issues crucial in learner output: negotiation of meaning, learner production, and repair work. The first two sections explain the theoretical background based on research findings. The third section suggests ways in which some of these findings may be applied to classroom situations. The fourth section summarizes the main points of the article, in particular, their implications in classroom teaching.

Learner Production and Language Learning

Recently, several second language acquisition (SLA) researchers have systematically argued that the function of L2 learners production is not only to enhance fluency and indirectly generate more comprehensible input, but also to facilitate second language learning by providing learners with opportunities to produce comprehensible output (Krashen 1985, 1989, 1994; Long 1983, 1990; Van Patten 1990). Learners achieve this by modifying and approximating their production toward successful use of the target language (Swain 1985, 1993, 1995; Swain and Lapkin 1995; Pica 1994; Pica, Holliday et al., 1989; Pica, Kanagy, and Falodun 1993; Pica, Lincoln-Porter, et. al., 1996; Shehadeh 1991).

Swain and Lapkin (1995:373) maintain that in the process of modifying their interlanguage (IL) utterances for greater message comprehensibility, L2 learners undertake some restructuring that affects their access to their knowledge base. "...the assumption is that this process of modification contributes to second language acquisition" (Swain and Lapkin 1995:373). Many scholars have concluded that opportunities for comprehensible input and output are equally important in language learning (Swain 1985, 1995; Swain and Lapkin 1995; Shehadeh 1991; Pica et al., 1989, 1993, 1996).

Similarly, many of these studies have shown that interactions, where the negotiation of meaning between native speakers/nonnative speakers (NSs/NNSs) and nonnative speakers/nonnative speakers (NNSs/NNSs) is prevalent, are also important for the production of comprehensible output. It is through the negotiation of meaning that both learners and their interlocutors work together to provide comprehensible input and produce comprehensible output.

Pica, Holliday, et al., (1989:65) pointed out that "although...research has focused mainly on the ways in which negotiated interaction with an interlocutor helps the learner to understand unfamiliar L2 input, we believe that it is also through negotiation that learners gain opportunities to attempt production of new L2 words and grammatical structures as well."

Negotiated interactions are important not only because they provide NNSs with an opportunity to receive input, which they have made comprehensible through negotiation, but also because these interactions provide NNSs with opportunities that enable them to modify their speech so that the

output is more comprehensible (Long 1983; Varonis and Gass 1985, Gas and Varonis, 1985, 1994; Doughty 1988, 1992; Deen 1995; Loschky 1994).

Repair Work and Language Learning

According to Schegloff et al., (1977) and Schegloff (1979), there is a cline in conversations. In normal conversation, the norm is self-initiated and self-completed repair. In non-normal conversation, the proportion of other-initiations and other-completions is higher than would be expected. In situations where there is a constant failure to repair, interlocutors will eventually cease to converse. It has also been observed that in NS/NS discourse (Schegloff et al., 1977) and NS/ advanced NNS discourse (Kasper 1985), the vast majority of repair is content and pragmatic repair rather than linguistic (phonological, lexical, morpho-syntactic) repair.

These observations suggest the thesis that success in L2 learning may be measured by the proportion of self-initiated, self-completed repair in relation to other-initiated, other-completed repair, and by the proportion of content and pragmatic repair in relation to linguistic repair. Thus, the more self-initiated, self-completed content and pragmatic repair, the more native-like the interaction will be. However, the more other-initiated, other-completed linguistic repair, the less native-like the interaction will be. Hence, the optimal L2 learning environment is one in which self-initiated, self-completed content and pragmatic repair dominates.

Research that investigated NS/NNS and NNS/NNS negotiated interaction has confirmed the importance of self-initiated, self-completed repair over other-initiated, other-completed repair (Kasper 1985, Shehadeh 1991). Shehadeh (1991) found that self-initiated clarification attempts occurred in significantly greater proportions than other-initiated clarification requests (70 percent versus 30 percent, respectively). Instances of self-initiated comprehensible output occurred in significantly greater proportions than instances of other-initiated comprehensible output (73 percent versus 27 percent, respectively). These findings confirmed that to have conversations that require the kind of performances associated with successful language learning, students need to focus on self-initiated, self-completed repair.

Pedagogical Implications

The results of these empirical studies and observations may provide some useful insights into classroom teaching. This section will suggest two different but closely related sets of pedagogical implications: those that relate to negotiating meaning and learner/ learner interaction, and those that relate to repair work.

Negotiation of meaning and learner/learner interaction

One of the main underlying principles of the studies on negotiating meaning is that all data emphasize task-based instruction and learner/learner interaction. Thus, the first set of pedagogical implications for language learning relates to activities that involve the negotiation of meaning in dyadic and group interactions.

In terms of classroom practice, this means that educators should introduce such activities as problem solving, decision making, opinion exchange, picture dictation, and jigsaw tasks. These types of activities provide an ideal atmosphere for negotiating meaning in appropriate contexts. Learners have opportunities to receive input that they have made comprehensible through

negotiation and at the same time, to produce comprehensible output, an output which learners have made comprehensible to other learners through negotiations.

The implications of the studies on the negotiation of meaning match paradigms such as the communicative language approach, which centers on learner/learner interactions. Indeed, this teaching approach emphasizes interactions that involve problem solving, decision making, and opinion exchange, picture dictation, and jigsaw tasks—all standard communicative exercises for developing fluency in the target language (TL) (Johnson 1982, Brumfit 1984, Hunter and Hofbauer 1989, Widdowson 1990).

Teachers who use the communicative approach can justify these types of activities because they encourage learners to produce comprehensible output in the direction of TL-like performances. The findings of interactional studies support the importance of interaction and the negotiation of meaning in developing proficiency in the target language, thus confirming the importance of negotiated interactions in the production of comprehensible output, one of the basic principles of the communicative language approach.

Repair work

The second set of pedagogical implications relates to repair work in the language classroom. The main conclusion here is that if repair leading to comprehensible output is integral to successful language learning, then not only are clarification requests (other-initiations) important, but more importantly, the extent to which self-repair is used. Therefore, self-initiated clarification attempts and self-initiated comprehensible output should be encouraged as preferred classroom strategies, which are strategies in NS/NS interaction (Schegloff et al., 1977).

Since the main goal of learning an L2 is to approximate NS/NS interaction, creating situations that encourage the production of self-initiated comprehensible output is a motivating teaching strategy. In conversations, these situations give the learner more opportunities to use the TL and are significantly more frequent than other-initiated clarification requests and instances of other-initiated comprehensible output (Gaskill 1980, Kasper 1985, and Shehadeh 1991).³

It must be cautioned that in the monolingual classroom, there is the possibility that students, in the process of their negotiated interactions and repair work, might resort to their shared mother tongue (MT) to complete the task or the activity required. Nonetheless, assuming that learners are motivated and desire to learn the TL, it is possible to argue that learner-use of the MT in performing the activities required is a more remote possibility than might be expected.

In Shehadeh's (1991) study, the two NNS subjects (ages 24 and 32) who shared one MT background (Arabic) interacted completely in English (the TL) rather than resorting to their shared MT to complete the tasks. This supports Long and Porter's (1985:224) conclusion that "the findings concerning mixed first language groups do not mean, of course, that group work will be unsuccessful in monolingual classrooms, which is the norm in many EFL situations...the research clearly shows that the kind of negotiation work of interest here is also very successfully obtained in the group of the same first language background."

Summary

The issues addressed in this article regarding the significance of negotiation of meaning, learner production, and repair work in classroom practice may be summarized as follows:

- Teachers need to create situations that encourage learner/learner, dyadic, and group interactions since these provide opportunities not only for more comprehensible input, but also for inter-language modification and comprehensible output.
- Teachers should create situations that encourage learner-based adjustments rather than interlocutor or teacher-based adjustments by setting up interactions that focus on self-initiated, self-completed repair, not other-initiated, other-completed repair.
- Teachers should encourage learners in the direction of self-initiated content/ pragmatic repair, rather than other-initiated linguistic repair.

Studies on the negotiation of meaning and repair work may provide many other useful insights into classroom teaching. In particular, pedagogical research may look at what types of tasks and activities might be used, what their distinguishing cognitive characteristics should be, how activities might be graded to match the proficiency levels of learners, and how teachers can create situations that encourage self-initiated, self-completed repair and learner/ learner negotiated interactions.

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Ali Shehadeh is an assistant professor in the College of Languages and Translation at King Saud University, Saudi Arabia.